Julie Fisher

Environments conducive to conversation

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Environments conducive to conversation

> **'Young children learn from those they trust and with those who foster enthusiasm for learning.' (Trevarthen 2002)**

Introduction

In 2006, the Basic Skills Agency commissioned research to consider how the physical environment impacts specifically on speaking and listening skills. Contributing to this research, Roskos and Neuman (2002) suggest that certain features within the physical environment and learning context provide an important infrastructure to enable the quality and quantity of children's oral language experiences to develop. Alongside their findings, the Basic Skills Agency published a 'communication supporting classrooms observation tool' which highlights the physical environment as crucial in facilitating children's exposure to diverse aspects of language and the organization of space and provision of materials as important for maximizing language richness (DfE 2012a). However, research shows that an environment conducive to talk and interaction is as much concerned with emotional space as it is with physical space. This chapter will examine both of these elements in analysing the environment that practitioners create.

Focus on babies and toddlers

The quality of the emotional environment in an early years setting becomes all the more important the younger the child. Manning-Morton (1994) says that for the youngest children, the most important resource for learning to communicate is the 'consistent, continuous care of responsive, familiar adults'. Sally Thomas (2002) suggests that in the early weeks and months of life the adult's face is the child's first Treasure Basket, revealing all manner of expressions, emotions and feelings in response to the child's efforts to communicate. In the absence of their parent(s), babies need to build secondary attachments with the Key Person in their setting who will offer them consistent, continuous care. Without these secondary attachments, O'Connor (2008) suggests that very young children will 'not be able to trust the responses of the adults to whom they look for reassurance and to make sense of new situations'. Practitioners working with babies and toddlers need to be aware of how watchful very young children are of adult reactions and responses to people and events. Smiles and expressions of surprise, happiness or warmth will be met with reciprocal expressions on the part of the child. An expression of disapproval or fear is likely to be registered by the child and possibly mirrored by them, whether it is what the child is feeling or not. Any tension in the practitioner's body, their face or their voice will give off signals that the adult is feeling stressed, that perhaps they lack time or energy or inclination to be a communicative partner, and that this interaction is not pleasurable. If a young child experiences these negative vibes too often then they will learn to keep their emotions to themselves and not attempt to interact with their practitioner for fear of being rebuffed. Young children, like all human beings, are affected by the mood of those around them. Cross, grumpy or impatient practitioners will affect the mood of young children, and impact on their confidence and well-being, in just the same way as being surrounded by those who are happy and relaxed. The baby who is subjected to the mood swings of an adult will not be secure in their relationship with that person, and will tend to withdraw rather than be drawn to the very person on whom they are supposed to rely. A positive emotional environment is created by practitioners who are consistent in their responses. The everyday tasks of nappy-changing, mealtimes, or going for a walk can all be reasons to get stressed (on the part of practitioner *and* child), or they can be opportunities for bonding, sharing experiences, and communicating feelings.

Physical environments that are conducive to conversations with babies and toddlers contain many features that are common to all young children (see below). However, there are certain particular considerations for those working with the youngest children:

- Young babies can be overstimulated by too many toys or people around them, and may cry to register their feelings. If the noise level in a setting rises it can make babies and toddlers fractious. If toddlers share spaces with older children they should have areas where they can retreat and not compete for space, resources or adult attention.
- Settings for babies and toddlers should be 'home-like', with sofas, cushions, pictures and small cosy spaces, rather than the larger more commercial spaces created for children 3-years-old and over. Use fabric drapes, for example, to 'lower' ceilings and make sleeping areas secure and welcoming.

Emotional space

An emotional space for the child

Trevarthen (2002) writes that children are born with motives to learn, not just *from* other people, but in companionship *with* them. In our nurseries and classrooms, what children continue to need is Manning-Morton's (1994) consistent, continuous care of responsive, familiar adults. This interpersonal relationship between practitioner and child is referred to by Rose and Rogers (2012) as 'interactional synchrony', which they describe as the relationship between practitioner and child in which the practitioner 'sensitively *tunes into* the child in a way that is 'in sync' with the child's needs and interests' (2012: 34). Tuning into children is the subject of the next chapter of this book but, in relation to creating emotional environments that are conducive to effective interactions, the prime message is that practitioners need to be 'in sync' with their children, leading to an empathetic responsiveness between adult and child, which conveys their shared emotions (Stern 1985).

The practitioners who are often best placed to create this shared emotion are those who have a role as a 'Key Person'. In Chapter 3, we saw the importance of the Key Person in creating close and trusting relationships with specific children and their families. The Key Persons Approach (Elfer et al. 2012) offers a valuable contribution to a setting's ethos in creating an emotional space where relaxed interactions can thrive. Having 'someone and not everyone' to talk to is more likely to result in a child being relaxed and trusting, both of which will inevitably contribute to more positive interactions.

As children move through nursery and into school there is an increasing pressure on practitioners to neglect the emotional environment in which children are educated in favour of an environment promoting targets, outcomes and goals. Yet one of the three Prime Areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage requires practitioners to help children 'develop a positive sense of themselves and others; form positive relationships and develop respect for others; develop social skills and learn how to manage their feelings; to have confidence in their own abilities' (DfE 2012b: para 1.6). Children cannot be expected to develop these personal, social and emotional attributes unless they experience an environment that promotes such attributes, and are alongside practitioners who model them. The uniqueness of young children means that their needs – emotional, social, cognitive and physical – will only be met by practitioners who know them well, who are alongside them and their developmental journey day in, day out, and who remain 'in sync' with their individual needs.

An emotional space for parents and carers

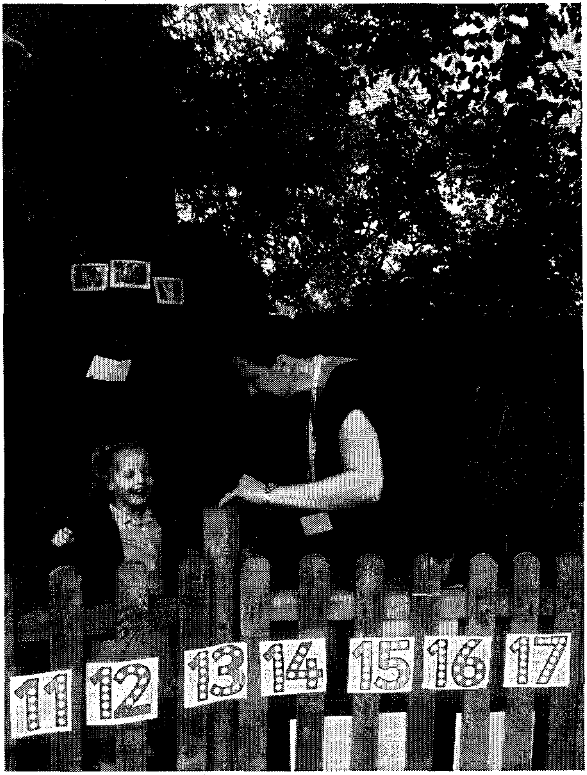
Being relaxed and being trusted is important, not just for children but also for their parents and carers. The Key Persons Approach, that is so important to the well-being of the young child, can be equally important to their parent or carer. O'Connor (2014) suggests that parents need to feel that the practitioners looking after their children are 'not only tuned in to their children, but are also tuned into them, how they feel about being apart from their children and the experiences they want for them' (2014: 44). Elfer et al. (2012) claim that the benefits of a Key Persons Approach for parents (particularly mothers) is that it ensures that parents, like their children, have the opportunity to build a personal relationship with 'someone' rather than 'all of them' working in the nursery. They suggest that 'the benefits are likely to be peace of mind and the possibility of building a partnership with professional staff who may share with them the pleasures and stresses of child-rearing' (p.23). Elfer et al. describe this special relationship with parents as the third element in a 'triangle of trust' between children, parents and practitioners. They remind practitioners that relinquishing part of the care and teaching of a baby or child to the staff in an early childhood setting is a big step, leaving some parents anxious that their child may not be cared for and given the attention that they would themselves give or, on the other hand, having concerns that their child will transfer their love and affection to the caregivers, thus leaving the parent feeling abandoned themselves. So, in creating an environment that is conducive to interactions, practitioners must be concerned for the interactions they have with parents and carers. By creating a 'triangle of trust', Key Persons in the nursery or classroom can 'provide a means through which (their) concerns may be taken into account' (p.35).

An environment that is emotionally conducive to relationships and interactions also takes account of all parents, and practitioners should always be sensitive to the warmth of the welcome that any parent or carer receives as they walk through the doors of the setting. Have parents received a home visit so that a relationship is established with the practitioner on secure and familiar territory? What signs and requests do parents see written on the walls and noticeboards of a setting as they arrive? Do those messages say 'Welcome' or do they say 'Don't'? Are messages, notices and newsletters written in languages that include all the parent community, or do they exclude some families? The physical environment can be highly significant in giving messages about the quality of the emotional environment to the whole family.

An emotional space for the practitioner

In order for practitioners to create a safe, emotional space in which children and their parents can thrive, they also need to ensure that their working environment is emotionally supportive of them as individuals. We can see that the 'triangle of trust' must involve the Key Person as one critical component of the relationship between the child, the parent and the setting. Elfer et al. remind us, however, that this relationship 'makes very real physical, intellectual and emotional demands upon the key person' and that these need to be 'understood, planned for and supported by... management' (Elfer et al. 2012: 23). O'Connor (2014) suggests that if the quality of the Key Person relationship has the biggest impact on the well-being of children attending an early years setting, then we must always consider the welfare of the Key Person. This means that every Key Person has the right to private discussion time with a mentor, manager or senior teacher to talk about every aspect of the role in order to 'offload'... the emotional challenges of working in such a close relationship with children and their families' (p.44).

Every early years practitioner knows that working with very young children brings emotional challenges. Tuning in to a young child's personal, social and emotional needs can touch on or sometimes expose a practitioner's own feelings, fears and vulnerability, and it takes professional integrity to sustain the necessary feelings of warmth and intimacy crucial to the role of the early childhood educator while keeping an appropriate professional distance. When practitioners feel good about themselves they are in the best place to support others, in turn, to feel good. I like O'Connor's (2014) analogy with the oxygen masks in an aeroplane: adults who do not put their own mask on first are not in a position to help those more vulnerable people who are relying upon them. The warm, attentive and relaxed practitioner encourages both children and their parents to have conversations that are of value. It is the everyday relaxed nature of intimate conversations that lead to a deeper knowledge and understanding of each child and how members of a family relate one to the other. As we saw in Chapter 3, it is knowing the child and the family well that opens up endless possibilities for interactions that deepen the emotional bonds between a practitioner and a child, and lead, in turn, to educational opportunities to support and extend learning.



Physical space

There are a number of key features of the physical environment that appear time and again in any review of the literature on environments that are conducive to talk and high-quality interactions. A significant contribution to this field has been made by Elizabeth Jarman, whose 'Communication Friendly Spaces Approach' *(www.elizabethjarmanltd.co.uk)* has pioneered many radical rethinks about the use of space in both nurseries and early years classrooms. Jarman says that her approach 'focuses on the role of the environment in supporting speaking and listening skills, emotional well-being, physical development and general engagement'. Much of her work has influenced the thinking of practitioners in the paragraphs below.

Key features of physical spaces conducive to high-quality interaction

Place

The first feature is, quite literally, the space that is provided – both indoors and out. It is clear that cramped, noisy spaces are not conducive to sustained conversations. We saw in Chapter 3 that both young children and the practitioners who work with them need to feel relaxed in order to tune in to each others' messages and signals, and the environment plays a big part in enabling this to happen. As part of their ongoing research for the Oxfordshire ACI Project, the participants explored what the national project *Every Child a Talker (ECAT)* (DCSF 2008) identified as 'communication hot spots' for conversation: places where young children seemed more willing to hold an extended conversation with an adult. When the Oxfordshire project participants were asked: 'Where, in your setting, are children most likely to talk to adults?', the answers were many and varied. In one setting it was outdoors, in another the home corner, in another at the snack table. Many of the practitioners agreed that it was in an enclosed area that had been created either indoors or out, such as a den or a willow tunnel.

In time, it became clear that it was not the actual place that mattered but, once again, where children felt most relaxed. So in answering this question, practitioners were able to identify the balance between those areas where their children felt at ease and were ready and willing to interact, and those where – for one reason or another – they were more reticent. In one setting, for example, practitioners agreed that their children were most relaxed outdoors, which led them to realize that all the child-led activities were outdoors and all the adult-led activities were indoors, and that this imbalance in their provision needed to change.

While discussing 'hot-spots' for children, it became apparent that it is not only children who have places in a setting where they feel more relaxed than others – practitioners have them too. On returning to film for the third and fourth time in a classroom or nursery I found some of the project participants in exactly the same area of the setting they were on previous occasions. When I asked why this was the case, the practitioners said something along the lines of : 'It's where I'm most relaxed.' This led to further discussions about spaces and places in the nursery or classroom where *practitioners* feel at ease, or are less confident about supporting learning. For some it was the block area, for some it was outdoors (because children did not stop to have conversations), for some it was in child-led learning rather than adult-led. The places where practitioners felt less relaxed varied, but until their existence was acknowledged, nothing could be done to address the insecurities. In one setting I worked in, all the staff admitted that they 'walked around' the block area uncertain as to how to support and extend the learning taking place there. So, in that setting, the children who most liked the block area and wanted an interested and attentive adult to be alongside them, found they were not there.

> “The emotional as well as the physical environment impact significantly on a child's willingness to relax and share their thinking and ideas”

Noise

Jarman (2009) reminds us that being in a noisy atmosphere makes it difficult for children – and indeed adults – to concentrate, which can have a negative impact on speaking and listening skills. It is easy for early years settings to become very 'busy', and the hustle and bustle means that noise levels impinge on the opportunity to have relaxed conversations. As adults we only have to think how hard it can be to have a decent conversation in a noisy club or pub, or when loud music is playing, to realize that noise can reduce a conversation to single word exchanges.

An environment that is conducive to interactions is designed with quiet areas that allow speaking and listening to take place with ease. Most young children love being in a den, under a table, in a willow gazebo – anywhere, in fact, where there is space for just one or two, and where conversations seem special and private. For many children speaking in public – on the carpet or in a group – is difficult, and can inhibit those who do not yet have the courage or confidence to speak in a more public space (see Transcript 8:2). This is not to say that such children should not be encouraged to speak in such situations, but if these more public occasions are the sole opportunity to speak with an adult, then many children will withdraw and many learning opportunities will be lost.

There has been an increase, of late, in the use of (particularly) recorded music in settings. Music is, of course, wonderful for creating mood and for accompanying some activities, but there is a danger in leaving it on continuously. It then becomes 'muzak', the kind of noise that happens in supermarkets or at the other end of a telephone call when you are put on hold, when the only awareness you have of the music is when it stops. Music must have a clear purpose and not just be a way of filling the space with noise. Too many of our children come from homes where a TV or radio is playing incessantly and where the television, in particular, is used as a 'babysitter' rather than as a source of shared attention between parent and child (Karmiloff-Smith 2012). They do not know the concentration that can come from a quiet and more peaceful environment. Too many of our young people have had their heads so permanently filled by noise that when asked to concentrate in an exam, when no earphones are permitted, they find it immensely difficult. The research of Mark Andrews (2013) shows not only does too much continuous background noise 'disrupt people's concentration', it also 'affects people's health by increasing general stress levels and aggravating stress-related conditions', and that 'Continued exposure does not lead to habituation; in fact, the effects worsen.'

> “A noisy environment is not conducive to speaking, listening or thinking. We must ensure we do not create learning spaces that make interactions difficult”

Light

Another feature of the environment emphasized by Jarman is the use of light. All the evidence points to the fact that human beings prosper more in natural sunlight than in artificial light. Jarman (2009) quotes research in California by the Heschong Mahone

Group (Heschong et al. 2002) which found that learners with lots of daylight in their classrooms progressed 20 per cent faster in mathematics and 26 per cent faster in reading in one year than those with the least exposure to daylight. This research was followed up by Mott et al. (2012) who reported the tendency of artificial light to be associated with more headaches and the exacerbation of some visual impairments (Winterbottom and Wilkins 2008); that artificial light can impact on mood and response to different learning situations (Knez 1995); and that mood may also determine the sharpness of cognitive abilities such as concentration and memory (McColl and Veitch 2001). While these research studies were not always conclusive, it does point to the fact that we need to ask important questions about how lighting is selected and used in our early years settings. Mood and concentration are inextricably linked with the desire and capacity to hold a conversation, and practitioners need to ensure that the lighting in their setting is not causing as much of a distraction for some children as noise levels might be.

Wherever possible, settings benefit from as much natural light as possible (with the facility to use blinds to negate glare). In the preschools in Reggio Emilia, light is created through the design of spaces which interconnect visually if not literally, so that 'if the body cannot get there then eyes and ears can' (Bishop 2001: 78). This is perhaps a reminder not to cover windows and the glass in doors with so many pictures or notices that children's sightlines are destroyed and natural light is unnecessarily reduced. Where artificial light is essential, Jarman recommends using transparent fabric or light-diffusing panels to reduce the harshness. But it is important to remember that artificial light can be used judiciously to create atmosphere, focus attention on something, create mood, and spark a conversation. Mark Dudek, in his inspirational book on kindergarten architecture (1996), suggests that 'total uniformity' is undesirable, and that certain walls be highlighted to focus attention while other spaces are less bright, creating calmer and 'quieter' places to be.

> “Creative practitioners use light, just as they use sound, to provoke different responses from children, leading to animated and absorbing interactions”

Position

The positioning of equipment and furniture has a significant effect on the quality of interactions in early years settings and classrooms. There has been interesting research in primary classrooms (e.g. Hastings and Schwieso 1995) showing that although teachers group tables and chairs to encourage children to talk, children are rarely given tasks that encourage them to collaborate, so talk is generally not about work and children are frequently told off for talking and not getting on with their (individual) tasks. The environment must support the pedagogy that practitioners want to promote. If interactions are seen as key to children's learning and development, then the environment must be evaluated for the opportunities it provides for interactions to flourish, and scrutinized for any situations where the positioning of furniture or resources impedes the likelihood of interactions taking place.

If a setting has both quiet and noisier areas for communication it is best that they are not side by side. I have seen beautifully organized and arranged book corners never used because they are placed alongside the home corner with all its busy comings and goings, and children who want to be quiet are constantly distracted by the home corner's hustle and bustle. Likewise with small world play. I watched a group of reception age girls (4-year-olds) attempting to create a complex and imaginative tale of dragons and princesses continually disturbed by boys making their exuberant way to the outside area and knocking against the small world table, overturning the characters which the girls had so carefully arranged. Practitioners need to look for the opportunities for talk they have created in their settings and then check that these are not disturbed by the activity going on next door or nearby which might well undermine the quality of interactions between peers and between children and practitioners.

It is really important to plan some spaces for reflective interaction in the outdoor area. A den made from a blanket over tree branches, a willow tunnel, a seat under a tree or a gazebo, all give children a sense of intimacy and focus that enables both parties involved to be able to concentrate on the other person and the subject in hand. We have seen how often interruptions disturb the rhythm and flow of an interaction, so being away from others, where interruptions are less likely to occur, gives children the opportunity to open up a conversation and move from the mundane, of-the-moment remarks to deeper, more meaningful interactions that offer practitioners the opportunity to support their children's social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive development.

> “Practitioners need to plan for their environments to have interaction-friendly spaces”

Stimulation

It is a common fault to think that early years environments should always be 'stimulating'. Indeed, it is a word too frequently used when people refer to the quality of environments for early learning. Like all environments, the early years setting needs variety. Settings need places that are quiet and places that can be noisier; places that are darker and subdued and places that are airy and bright. Likewise they need places that are stimulating and places that are calmer and more tranquil. If young children are to talk to practitioners, they need opportunities to be in both kinds of space – which can lead to very different conversations. Conversations in quiet places are often more contemplative and can frequently be personal and revealing. When children feel safe and confident that they will not be interrupted they will often reveal deeper thoughts about issues that are troubling them, which are important to them, or which they are struggling to understand. They will have the opportunity to think reflectively and maybe talk through solving a problem, without being too distracted by others around them. Conversations in stimulating spaces are often energetic and quick-fire. They ricochet from one person to another in a succession of co-constructed suggestions and ideas. Such conversations often accompany action and experimentation and demand a highly attentive practitioner to follow the threads of the children's thinking.

“The most effective early years settings encourage interactions in places that are familiar, calm and reassuring as well as novel, stimulating and provoking”

When I review the environments in settings and schools, I sometimes find an overemphasis on one kind of environment. Sometimes the environment is kept too quiet, with children suppressed by the practitioner's desire to control everything that takes place within it. This kind of repressed quiet does not bring about the conversations that take place in a den or shady arbour where a safe haven for interaction has been created and both children and practitioners are relaxed. Repressed quiet makes children – and practitioners – tense and, as we have seen in Chapter 3, this frequently foils the flow of an interaction. Equally an environment can be overstimulating. If everything is new and different and exciting then children ricochet from one activity to another without any sense of settling calmly to something familiar. In these environments the quality of learning remains superficial because children are always looking for something ‘else’ and never develop the concentration and perseverance that comes from playing with resources and materials that are known and with which children can build on their previous experiences.

Time

Children need to know that adults have time for them and will take time to listen to them. It is all too easy to walk past a child with a brief ‘A-hah’ which, however friendly, hardly gives a child the sense that what they have said matters. If a child starts a conversation, or is to be encouraged to sustain that conversation, then a practitioner's body language has to send the message that they have all the time in the world to listen.

It is easy to imagine that the longer the time a practitioner spends with a child then the more opportunities there are for shared thinking and contributions to learning. But this is not always the case. A practitioner can be alongside a child for a considerable length of time but, as we have seen in Transcript 3:2, because there has been little attempt or success in tuning in to the child and their thinking, the practitioner may simply be interrupting the child's learning rather than enhancing it.

It is the *quality* of time spent with children rather than the *quantity* of time that convinces children that a practitioner is interested in them, their ideas and their conversation, and that will encourage them to interact another time. The practitioner whose body language shows they are attentive and interested will encourage a conversation to continue, and the response of the practitioner will determine whether the child feels that speaking to that practitioner is worthwhile or not and something they would choose to do again.

“Effective practitioners are alert to every conversation that comes their way and realize that valuable interactions do not only arise at planned and predictable times”

Experiences

Many of the most effective interactions recorded as part of the Oxfordshire ACI Project came ‘out of nothing’. They began as a result of a chance remark about a new coat, a sick hamster, a squashed worm or the class lists on the wall. The effective practitioner is alert to every opportunity for a conversation and conscious of the fact that nothing matters more to the confidence and linguistic and cognitive development of a child than to stop, get down and listen to what the child wants to say. Most children have a whole sackful of things that they want to say and to share. Chilvers says children have a 'built-in urge to tell you, in some way, what they are thinking, feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. They are powerful communicators.' (2006: 5). More often than not all children need is an attentive audience and they will open up a conversation. All practitioners need to do is to be that attentive audience.

Though many valuable interactions arise spontaneously, this does not mean practitioners do not plan for them. As we have seen in this chapter already, practitioners plan environments and resources and experiences that provide optimum opportunities for interactions to be initiated and sustained. But practitioners also plan experiences that will engage children's interest in order to stimulate their verbal contributions – for example, hiding characters from a favourite book in a sack and predicting who will come out next to tell their part of the story. These kind of planned experiences have immense value, but practitioners need to guard against forcing or manipulating interactions that suit their purposes as the educator rather than bringing the richest communicative contributions from the child. In the Oxfordshire DVD footage, when we asked or expected children to talk, they often did not. Put children into a 'circle time' situation, or ask them to explain an idea or to tell everyone about something they have done, and their replies become more limited and inhibited than when they have chosen to interact spontaneously. They often said something they thought the practitioner wanted to hear rather than necessarily what they were thinking or feeling. In addition, because in these planned situations children were frequently competing for the practitioner's time and attention, there was less time for an interaction to develop in depth. There are times, of course, when we want slightly older children to have the experience of speaking confidently to a group, to show they can express their thoughts and feelings to others, and to show awareness of the needs of listeners. However, speaking in public, answering questions in a large group and listening to others, develops a set of skills as separate from interaction for thinking, as handwriting is different from creative writing. Both are important, but the skill set and objectives are different. If we want talk for learning (Mercer and Hodgkinson 2008), then we must create opportunities without stress, without expecting answers on the spot, and without always defining the agenda – the very strategies that so often characterize interactions 'on the carpet'.

If educators appreciate the importance of talk to the young child as outlined in Chapter 1, then nothing is more important than responding to that conversational opener from the child. Many of the richest conversations come out of nothing and out of nowhere. They are topics that come into a child's head as they remember something or see something that triggers a memory or a connection. Their topics can sometimes seem random, but the attentive adult usually finds a thread to their thinking which shows that what they are saying is a result of a memory, some previous experience, or a current concern.

Analysing your own practice

These are the features of effective practice that the Oxfordshire practitioners identified in analysing the learning environment in relation to the quality of adult – child interactions:

***Features of interactions where* environments are conducive**

- Children and their parents and carers feel valued and believe that what they have to say matters.
- Practitioners prioritize interactions with children over anything else.
- There are spaces to talk quietly and places that stimulate talk during action.
- Practitioners give children 'all the time in the world' by stopping, getting down to their level, and listening.
- Experiences provide many reasons to talk, to discuss, and to raise questions.
- Light and noise levels and resources all support the quality of interactions.

***Features of interactions where* environments are not conducive**

- Children and/or their parents and carers do not feel that what they say is valued.
- Practitioners pass by children's conversational openers, rather than stopping, getting down and listening to what they have to say.
- Too many places are noisy and not conducive to interaction.
- Children who enjoy very active, outdoor learning never get a chance to talk with attentive practitioners.
- Practitioners do not give children the time they need to think things through and to raise their own questions.
- Bright lights, noise levels and overstimulation detract from the quality of conversations.

Transcripts: environments conducive to conversation

Transcript 4:1 'Nina and Charlotte in the sandpit'

Charlotte (18 months) is in the sandpit outdoors with her Key Person Nina. Charlotte is saying 'crumble sand', a phrase she has used a lot in the sandpit recently.

C: This be the crumble sand, crumble sand.

A: *(Smiles, mirroring what Charlotte is doing.)* Crumble sand.

C: The crumble sand *(Sits back to look at her efforts.)* Ha-ha! (*Returns to moulding the sand.)* Need crumble sand.

A: You like that don't you? Are you going to do it again?

C: Me do some.

A: *(Still mirroring what Charlotte is doing.)* You like doing that one.

C: (*Sits back.*) There's a chair.

A: (*Smiles at her.)*

C: Shall I make another one?

A: Yes.

C: Then I can make a house.

A: That seems like a nice idea.

C: Make... a house.

A: Do you need me to move round? Shall I move round a little bit?

C: Yes.

A: To give you some space.

C: Yes... give me some space!

A: Yes... that's it, you need space don't you?

C: Yes.

A: And you're going to build another... is it a wall for the house? *(Charlotte doesn't answer.)* Is it a wall?

C: There.

A: Is that where you want to build it? So, what do we do... do we just scoop the sand like this with our hands... but over there. Is that what you want to do?

C: Yeh. I need to be over there then.

A: You're going over there then, OK.

C: (*Charlotte moves.*) I've made two spaces there (*She carefully moulds the sand.)* There you go!

A: There you go! That was really well done.

C: Can you move out the way?

A: Of course. *(They laugh. Charlotte moves back to where she was before.)* Now, what's next? What else do we need to put into our house?

C: We need to... crumble sand, crumble sand, crumble sand, crumble. (*She sits back.)* There you go! It's a house.

A: Is that your house? Who lives in your... (*Charlotte bashes the 'house' down.)* Oh! All gone.

C: Crumble sand! *(They look at each other and grin.)*

A: Is that all crumbly? All crumble and gone now.

C: *(Stands up and stamps all over the sand.)* Crunch, crunch, squash, squash, squash.
A: Squash, squash, squash.
C: *(Picks up spade and holds it in front of her, looking at adult.)*
A: You've got your spade. I've got my spade. What shall we do with our spades? *(Charlotte doesn't answer.)* I think I'll dig a hole.
C: I think I'll dig a hole too.

Analysis
This transcript is characterized by how relaxed the practitioner and child are in each other's company. There is a lot of smiling and some lovely humorous exchanges between the two. They are outdoors, which Charlotte loves, and Nina is happy to be there too. The sandpit is big enough for creative play (not a small sand tray), and is covered by a canopy so there is a feeling of it being enclosed and intimate. Charlotte is enjoying the physical sensation of moulding the sand. In Nina, she has a warmly attentive practitioner who is following her lead. Charlotte is not really interested in making the 'house'. In fact the only time that Nina asks a direct question, 'Who lives in your...?', Charlotte's response is to bash the house down.

Ask yourself: *What does the child gain?*
See the end of the transcripts in Chapter 3 for ideas.

Transcript 4:2 'Debbie and Star Wars'

Debbie teaches in Year 1. The school has a terrific outdoor area: trees, logs, a mud kitchen, rope swings, places to dig and places to plant. A group of boys are playing Star Wars. Their leader, Harry, is one of a handful of boys who sit at the back of a carpet session unable to pay attention, and adults find difficult to 'engage'.

C: Mrs B. *(Hands her a small log.)* Do you want a laser to keep you safe?
A: Yeh... can I use it, yeh?
C: Yeh *(He turns away.)*
A: Harry... sorry... what do I do?
C: You keep your hand there *(Pointing to a specific place on the log.)*
A: OK. And where do I put it? On my shoulder or under my arm?
C: No, look, you hold it here.
A: You show me. (*He does so.*) Right, OK. And what... if I see any droids?
C: If you see droids. And there's that...
C2: Battle droids.
A: OK. What do they look like? What colour are they?
C: They look like...
C2: They're metal.
C: (*Very emphatically.)* No, they're not little... they're *big*... the same size as me.
C2: I said they're *metal*.
A: Metal... he said they were metal.
C: Yes *(Nods.)* And there's some, there's some other stormtroopers who are baddies.

A: (*Brandishing her 'laser'.*) Coo, I feel like a real soldier... it's good *(Grins at C2.)*

C2: And Mrs B., if you see any white guys with guns and they're kind of turquoise-ish, and there are robots and there's a gun and they're in space, shoot them cos they're baddies.

C: Mrs B., Mrs B. – you know that pan there? (*Pointing to the mud kitchen.*) You know all them pans?

A: Yeh.

C: That's the baddies' camp.

A: Oh.

C: If you see white guys with helmets on... they're goodies.

A: Hang on... I'm getting confused... I'm going to be shooting the wrong ones Harry. The ones that are goodies, what colour are they?

C: White.

A: White.

C: Yeh – they got helmets on.

A: Helmets on... right. So anyone without a helmet on, or metal, I shot? Yeh?

C: Yeh.

A: Am I on my own, or is anyone else going to help me?

C: We'll help you.

A: OK . So do I stay here or can I, like, go off and...?

C: This is the laser beam. You put it there and then you put your shield over it and then it kills all them droids.

A: Oh right.

C: It's a laser beam.

A: Thanks for arming me Harry. I feel a bit safer now *(She settles down holding her laser ready.)*

C3: There's one there!

A: Oh, where?

C: *(Looking up.)* Oh yeh, and there's big ships like them ones.

A: OK, alright, I'm gonna get it (*Aims her laser.*) Ready Kiran... you going to help me?

C3: Liam put your head down!

C: *(To teacher.)* You press this button there *(Pointing to a specific point on the log.)*

A: Oh not, I pressed it wrong!

C: You pressed the shield. You sent the shield grenade at me. They got a shield an' it kills...

C2: Mrs B., this one's got a...

C: *(Whispering to C2.)* Mrs. B pointed the shield grenade at me.

A: I did it wrong! I gotta press this bit.

C: Yeh, 'cos they got to explode, 'cos they got to explode this and then the shield comes off and they didn't even know that.

A: Oh right.

C: And they can't hear us now.

A: Oh well, that's all right isn't it. OK... so I'm gonna press this if I see anyone, yeh?

C: Yeh *(Runs off towards the 'baddies' camp.)*
A: Cool.
C: Hey – you almost got that tree down!
A: Oh, oh sorry. I'm not very good. I'm new. *(C2 grins at her.)* I'm not as expert as you. I'm not very good at shooting. Right, help me out Guy (C2).
C2: You know... the place where... when you have to keep looking at me... but when I put my thumbs up that means it's good to shoot.
A: All right, OK. I'm relying on you.
C2: *(Runs off.)* O-ohh.
A: *(Watches where he goes closely.)* Oh! *(Stands up and shoots.)* Pshhew! He put his thumbs up!

Analysis

The children involved in this play do not respond to an indoor, more static environment. They prefer the freedom of the outdoors and the opportunity to develop their own self-initiated play. By inviting the teacher into the play they are showing a great deal of respect and affection. They know, from previous experience, that she will join in and enhance their play, not condemn it (because it is 'gun play') or try and take it over (because it doesn't have her objectives). The teacher remains absolutely engaged in the storytelling throughout. By joining in and following their lead, the teacher creates a strong relationship with the boys that will spill over into more formal, perhaps more sedentary, learning situations when the need arises. She will know more about the boys' interests and will use them as a 'hook' for the learning that she leads. The freedom of the environment in which the boys are playing allows them to be creative and imaginative and helps them improve their social skills as they negotiate and act out their story.

Ask yourself: *What does the child gain?*

See the end of the transcripts in Chapter 3 for ideas.

Summary

This chapter analysed the various factors of an environment that is conducive to high-quality interactions. It emphasized the importance of the emotional environment as much as the physical environment, and suggested that, as with most aspects of early education, a balance is required between environments that stimulate and excite and those that calm and consolidate. The quality of adult–child interactions is profoundly affected by the environment in which they take place, and practitioners need to be familiar with all the different features of their nursery or classroom that could impact on whether children chose to engage in sustained exchanges, or not. In the next chapter we consider more closely how practitioners tune in to children's thinking, and how effective practitioners make judgements about when and whether to intervene in children's learning.

Self-reflection

1 Do I value interactions? Do children and their parents believe they are listened to and responded to?

2 Where are children most relaxed in my setting? Where am I most relaxed?

3 Does our environment encourage – both emotionally and physically – high-quality interactions to take place?

4 Am I alert to every conversation that comes my way?